

PAYING IT FORWARD:

A profile of Valerie Smith, U.S. Attorney's Office

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If you ask the people closest to Valerie Smith to describe her journey that culminated into a career as a successful lawyer you would hear different answers. One of her mentors, Robert (Bobby) Houlihan Jr., an accomplished attorney in Lexington, describes her path as unique. Determination is the word state court judge Pamela Goodwine used while her current boss, U.S. Attorney Kerry Harvey, says “she has a remarkable life story and an uncommon breadth of real world experiences.”

But Smith, who received her law degree in 2007 at age 37, doesn't get the most satisfaction from reminiscing about her road to success, even though she encountered hardships and chaos that threatened to ruin her aspirations.

Smith, now an attorney with the U.S. Attorney's Office in Lexington, points to a recent conversation she had with a stranger as an example of what brings her the most fulfillment.

She was briskly walking through the halls of Rupp Arena, moving toward her seat section to listen to speakers at a motivational conference when she noticed an elderly gentleman staring at her.

The man offered her a pleasant gaze of familiarity causing Smith to stop.

“Can I ask you a question?” said the man with an upbeat tone. “Aren't you that attorney who gave that presentation on bankruptcy and foreclosures?”

Smith acknowledged him, paused and then smiled while the man shared just how informative Smith's presentation had been for him.

It had been a year and a half since Smith volunteered to present the information at a conference on behalf of the Urban League's Young Professionals.

As Smith thanked the man, she was filled with warm satisfaction.

“That's what it's all about,” Smith said to herself.

The man's comments would've also made her mother proud, for that's who taught Smith one of life's most important principles – one that provides supreme motivation and purpose every day she opens her eyes.

Paying it forward is a concept that others taught her and she's passing it on through her devoted actions.

Made popular by the 2000 movie, “Pay it Forward” is loosely defined as a recipient of a good deed doing a good deed for a third party rather than paying the favor back to the original person.

Smith lost her stepfather when she was young, leaving her mother, who worked for the New York City Board of Education to raise Smith and her four siblings, including her adopted brother, all on her own. However, that didn't stop Smith's mom from frequently welcoming underprivileged children into their home for meals, lodging, mentoring or whatever they needed that Smith's family had to provide.

“If we had, they had,” said Smith. “That's what I saw my mom do, and it's all I know. You must give back to others.”

More than two decades ago, Smith embarked on a difficult journey that would ultimately help her pay it forward. She began raising her infant twins on her own at age 20 while putting herself through college at Fordham University in New York City.

Smith graduated from Fordham in 1994 with a degree in political science and then worked as a court officer in New York while earning her master's degree in Social Services.

Because of the high cost of living in New York City and Smith's devotion to provide better housing and schooling for her children, she at times worked two and three jobs ranging from a social worker and a court officer to an office manager at a bail bonds agency. Being a single parent of two and working several jobs barely spared Smith enough time to blink before starting the same day all over again.

After spending almost 25 years of her life in New York, Smith, a Kentucky native, moved back to the Bluegrass State in August of 2003 to pursue a law degree at the University of Kentucky and raise her family in what she hoped was a safer environment.

But shortly after she arrived in Lexington mother nature viciously interrupted her plans.

On May 27, 2004, Smith received a phone call from her son who was at a neighbor's house asking how to protect himself from a tornado. Smith immediately turned on the local news to listen to the meteorologist.

She can still recall the frightening moments right before a tornado slaughtered her new home. >>

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